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Religiosity and the political economy of the Salem witch trials

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Abstract

Salem Village, both before and through the witchcraft trials, was a religion-based community, allowing its minister to exert a level of political-economic control over its citizens. During the height of the witchcraft episode, there was an increased demand for ministerial services (salvation) in the Salem area. Recent research has argued that the minister used the witchcraft episode to maintain and build upon personal and corporate wealth. In the years after the witchcraft trials changes were made in the business and legal environment of the surrounding New England region. By transitioning to a more neutral rules system with a larger area of consensus for the system, Salem and the rest of the New England transitioned from the 17th Century traditional, religion-based community to a more rules-based, pro-business one in the 18th Century.

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1. Introduction and background

In the 17th Century, Salem, Massachusetts, was a community-oriented society with strong religious beliefs. The Puritans, and Puritan religious doctrine, dominated the area and they had a strong presence in daily life. Consequently, the Salem witchcraft episode that began in 1692 had a significant influence on the position and power of the Puritan ministers of Colonial Massachusetts. The beginning and aftermath of this episode both offer a compelling avenue for the public choice approach.

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A number of recent studies have examined various public choice facets of the Salem witchcraft trials. The first of these, [Mixon \(2000\)](#), briefly explored the potential market-pull aspects of the Salem witch trials by alluding to a stylized, static model of the delivery and use of Puritan religious doctrine in 17th Century Colonial America. [Mixon \(2000\)](#) builds upon research by [Ekelund, Hébert, and Tollison \(1989\)](#), and it is amenable to an examination of the role of Puritan religious views on witchcraft during Colonial times. Also building upon [Ekelund et al. \(1989\)](#), [Mixon and King \(2008\)](#) develop a graphical model to describe why the Puritan ministers of 1692 Salem (e.g., Samuel Parris and Nicholas Noyes) sought to control the witchcraft episode from both a spiritual and judicial perspective. In the [Mixon \(2000\)](#) and [Mixon and King \(2008\)](#) models, the Puritan ministers provided ministerial services as holders of a local monopoly franchise, albeit a temporary one.¹ Both studies also suggest that one of these ministers, Salem Village's Samuel Parris, sought to solve his difficulties in dealing with the various factions of Salem Village by using witchcraft hysteria to increase the demand for ministerial services. Consistent with [Weisman \(1984\)](#), ministers, such as Parris, were in a unique position to accomplish this goal, given that witchcraft in 1692 Massachusetts could not be understood outside of the context of theology—it was a derivative from crucial assumptions within Puritan beliefs, the dominant source of theological thought at the time. It was logical that the people of 1692 Salem looked to the Puritan clergy for help ([Hansen, 1969](#); [Mixon, 2000](#)); the ministers played a vital dual role by providing traditional ministerial services as well as judicial services in specific legal situations (e.g., witchcraft cases). This combination of roles helped to solidify and increase the ministers' position in society.²

That the Salem ministers used the hysteria to effect an increase in the demand for salvation is also consistent with earlier work in this genre by [Boyer and Nissenbaum \(1974\)](#), which suggests that Parris and the other ministers exploited the young female accusers for personal and corporate gain. “Most villagers turned to him for explanation and guidance during the witchcraft episode, and church attendance and Parris's stature in the village soon soared. According to Boyer and Nissenbaum, Parris drew on the energies of the population to shore up his own leadership ([Mixon, 2000: 182](#)).”

This article does not dispute the industrial organization hypotheses developed in [Boyer and Nissenbaum \(1974\)](#), [Mixon \(2000\)](#) and [Mixon and King \(2008\)](#). Instead, it extends the analysis beyond that of [Mixon \(2000\)](#) and [Mixon and King \(2008\)](#) by exploring religiosity and the political economy of Salem before, during, and after the witchcraft trials. In doing so, it provides a public choice perspective on the social and economic changes that occurred, some of which relate to the working of the judicial system, while others are more directly tied to financial institutions and practices. These issues are addressed in Sections 2 and 3.

2. Religiosity and political economy of 17th century Salem

The 17th Century Colonial American Puritans were devoted to God and community. According to [Mann \(1986\)](#), “early Puritanism was an exceptionally legalistic theology. It defined the fundamental relationship between God and the individual as a contractual one. . . . The legalism of covenant theology had far-reaching consequences in 17th Century New England, where the

religious covenant between God and the individual believers was the model for social covenants that linked individuals in communities and communities to God (Mann, 1986: 1432).³

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was formed by the Massachusetts Bay Company, under the leadership of John Winthrop (Middleton, 1996). Winthrop desired to make Massachusetts a model Christian Society, and one that was based on the Calvinist religious doctrine of predestination. Given that the doctrine of predestination meant that whether or not one was to get to Heaven was determined prior to birth, Colonial Puritans sought to show outwardly to others that they possessed the qualities of one who was predestined for Heaven. This meant working hard, doing good deeds, being active in the community, having strong faith and attaining Church Covenant membership (Yerby, 2008).³ Naturally, given this system, religious leaders in places such as Salem, Massachusetts, were extremely important in many ways to the members of the community.

During the pre-1692 period, proceeding through the witchcraft trials, there was an uneasy environment in Massachusetts. According to Roach (2002: xxv–xxvi), “[t]he Salem witchcraft trials erupted during an eight-year war [King William’s War] while Massachusetts steered an unauthorized government with a nearly empty treasury through the hazards of French imperialism, Algonquin resentment, and English suspicion.” The new charter government in Massachusetts in 1692 heightened the colonists’ negative attitude toward civil authority (Breen & Foster, 1973).⁴

Compounding these problems were issues within Massachusetts’ Puritan church itself, where the traditional practice of *conversion relation*, wherein prospective members of the Puritan church were examined by members of the congregation – a process often described as unpleasant – was coming under fire by later generations. As a result of this potential threat to church membership (Editors, 2008), the Puritans adopted what became known as the *Half-way Covenant*, a process that allowed prospective members to attain at least partial church membership without a conversion relation (Ahlstrom, 1975).⁵

In addition to church membership issues, the Puritan church faced vocal critics, such as Anne Hutchinson, the “unauthorized” Puritan minister who held relatively advanced notions about the equality and rights of women (Ellsberg, 1997), and who claimed that God’s voice was telling her that the members of church’s hierarchy were unsaved, and that the Puritan doctrine of predestination should be challenged as excessively strict (Faber, 1970). Hutchinson made these proclamations during Bible studies that she held in her home. Over time, these gatherings became more and more popular with women (and some men), attracting as many as 80 each week (Ellsberg, 1997), some of whom were from prominent families. Hutchinson was brought to trial in the General Court of Massachusetts in 1637, which was presided over by Winthrop, on the charge of traducing the laws of church and state (Ellsberg, 1997; Gomes, 2002). Hutchinson was not only found guilty by the Court, she was also condemned and excommunicated by the Puritan church in a religious trial held in 1638 by the First Church in Boston (Crawford, 1970). Hutchinson was ultimately banished from Massachusetts Colony (Crawford, 1970; Ellsberg, 1997; Gomes, 2002).⁶

“According to the clergy, the greatest danger – and the cause for divine displeasure – was increasing secularization in the life of the colony and the consequent loss of religious zeal (Werking, 1972: 283).”⁷ The ministers faced economic and other incentives to keep their communities from losing any further ground to secular institutions, and to reclaim the ground

that was previously lost to them (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1974; Mixon, 2000). This was especially true once a threat perceived as great as the threat of witchcraft began in Salem and the surrounding area. The major problem – one that ultimately contributed to the shift from community-based personal, legal, and economic systems – was the extreme adherence to legalistic religious rules, as with the Pharisees much earlier in history (Crabtree, 2003).

As the rapid spread of witchcraft accusations showed, the whole region was susceptible to panic in 1692.⁸ Because the scare began in Salem, local troubles, such as problems of self-government in an area with vexingly ambiguous boundaries tangled with political, economic, and church issues (Roach, 2002: xxv–xxvi) had provided the catalyst. Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974), Mixon (2000), Mixon and Trevino (2003) and Mixon (2005) describe the early 1690s Salem as a community divided geographically. Salem Village was a small, agrarian community that relied on Salem Town's commercial enterprise and its access to waterways and ports. At the same time, Salem Village was not, in the modern sense, incorporated in that it did not have its own government. Instead, it relied again on Salem Town to its east, which was a much larger and more mercantile environment, for its government and religious services.

Salem Town, with its commercial and industrial growth, was more cosmopolitan. As a result of its cosmopolitan culture, which was growing in the late 17th Century, Salem Town was also becoming more secular over time. The Puritans wanted Massachusetts to operate as a theocracy (Demos, 1982), and the slower-to-change Salem Villagers wanted to split from Salem Town when and where possible. By 1689, Salem Town allowed Salem Village to operate its own church (Demos, 1982). It was at this point that tensions between West Salem Village and East Salem Village began to heighten. In the west, the citizens supported the Village's choice in Puritan minister, Samuel Parris. East Salem Villagers were wealthier land owners who aligned themselves more with the contiguous and commerce-oriented citizens of Salem Town. After the Village gained its own religious affiliation, East Salem Villagers were often in dispute with the West Salem Villagers over Parris' role as Salem Village's religious leader.

Once the witchcraft episodes began, wherein the accusers were largely West Salem Villagers, while the accused were generally East Salem Villagers (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1974; Mixon & Trevino, 2003), citizens who sought to protect themselves from spiritual warfare from witches had relatively few options. One of these was counter-magic, or good magic (Roach, 2002). The ministers sought to eliminate this option for two main reasons: Biblical scripture warned against it, and if magic spells were viewed by a portion of the populace as effective, Puritan ministers would have been viewed as unnecessary by part of the community. In the case of Biblical scriptures, the ministers availed themselves of the argument that if someone fearing a witch (i.e., Satan) sought protection, it is not logically consistent to consider a witch (i.e., Satan) as a source of that protection. Instead, prayer, scripture-reading, and church attendance in particular, were encouraged by Parris and other Puritan ministers as necessary forms of protection from witches. Such prescriptions also had the benefit of protecting the ministers' and Puritan church's personal and corporate wealth (Mixon, 2000), as well as the ministers' social capital, such as their standing in the community.

The latter argument above rests on the fact that the Puritan ministers derived their livelihood from the community they served. Ekelund, Hébert, and Tollison (2005) postulate that the

compensation of the clergy is more or less based on their industry and reputation. Citing Adam Smith, they state: “They are obliged, therefore, to use every art which can animate the devotion of the common people (Ekelund et al., 2005: 649).” In other words, there was a market for ministers to sell religious services to members of the community, and to acquire and maintain market share, a minister needed to be viewed by community members as a righteous and responsible person who was capable of protecting them. Competition in religious services provision presented a threat to the security and prosperity of the Puritan ministers (Ekelund, Hébert, & Tollison, 1989, 1992; Ekelund, Hébert, & Tollison, 2002; Ekelund et al., 2005; Mixon & King, 2008; Mixon, 2000).⁹

The prominence of Puritan ministers also helped them maintain other forms of social control over Salem Village and surrounding communities. The alleged behavior of the accused witches was characterized as anti-social (i.e., hostile, aggressive, and disobedient), and the ministers did not want to allow it to erode ministerial control and disrupt the community. It seems intuitive, given the time period, that the desired control is exhibited by the fact that the vast majority of the accused witches were women (Demos, 1970).¹⁰ The laws that applied to witchcraft hysteria in Colonial America were based on an English statute passed in 1604 during the reign of James I, and conviction of witchcraft carried with it the death penalty. The Colonial law was written in the English tradition in that it prohibited “conjuration, witchcraft, and dealing with evil and wicked spirits (Hill, 1995).”

The battle over religious services provision in Salem Village began during Parris’ tenure just before the witchcraft trials (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1974; Mixon & Trevino, 2003). When the Salem witchcraft hysteria began, Phips appointed a Court of Oyer and Terminer to preside over the indictments, trials and penalties (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1974; Demos, 1982; Godbeer, 1992; Hall, 1991).¹¹ That Court’s Chief Magistrate was Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor William Stoughton, while its clerk and prosecutor were Stephen Sewall and Thomas Newton, respectively.¹² Among the other members of the commission at one time were John Richard, John Hathorne, Wait Winthrop, Jonathan Corwin, William Sargeant, Increase Mather, Samuel Sewall, Nathaniel Saltonstall, and Bartholomew Gedney, all men (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1974; Starkey, 1963).

While the main accusers were young girls, most (about 75 percent) of the witnesses at the various witchcraft trials of the day were men (Demos, 1970: 1316).¹³ Of the male and female witnesses at those witchcraft trials, 74 percent and 80 percent, respectively, were married (Demos, 1970: 1316). This supports the theory that the witchcraft trials were utilized to help maintain the status quo and quell perceived aberrant behavior.¹⁴ While such behavior would not be desired from men, it was viewed as especially unacceptable from women, such as those in the defendant’s docket in the various witch trials of the day.

By the end of the 17th Century, the ministers’ prime influence over Colonial society, which began under Parris’ tenure just prior to the witchcraft trials, was weakening because of the continued attempts to adhere to the desired legalistic religious rules; with this change came diminished ministerial prosperity and diminished ministerial religious and social control. A number of changes in the political, economic and legal systems lay over the horizon in 18th Century New England. Through an examination of religiosity and the political economy of 18th Century Salem and surrounding areas, the next section explores some of these continuing changes.

3. Religiosity and political economy of 18th century Salem

As the witchcraft trials ended, a shift away from traditional community-based judicial (and other) processes began. In general, “church leadership was discredited by the witchcraft mania at Salem in 1692, and weakened by the powerful backlash of public remorse which followed it (Johnson, 1976: 424).” This decline in ministerial power and influence opened the door for changes that reflected the growing commercialization and internationalization of places such as Salem Town and Boston.¹⁵ With the economy acting as an engine, the loosening of ministerial control, and thus local (community) control, actually began before the witchcraft trials and continued for the next fifty years. Summarizing the ministerial position on these changes, Cotton Mather wrote in 1702 that “Religion brought forth prosperity, and the daughter destroyed the mother (Johnson, 1976: 424).”¹⁶

The systemic changes were much broader than merely a decrease in ministerial influence. Changes in currency, which occurred with the issuance of paper money in 1709, and in how legal matters were conducted, represent two other major changes in this era (Mann, 1986).¹⁷ To begin with, the economy needed a stimulant; barter could no longer be a main component if the economy were to grow. The uneven distribution of information induced individuals to search for alternatives to barter (Brunner & Meltzer, 1971).¹⁸ Into the early 18th Century, silver and gold coins were in circulation, but the coins were valued too highly to be used in domestic transactions. As a result, they were more commonly utilized in international transactions (Priest, 2001). As merchants increasingly desired a useable form of money (Breen & Foster, 1973), the Colonial governments responded with a move toward paper money. This change “allowed new traders to enter towns and compete with established merchants by offering farmers cash for their goods (Mann, 1986: 1421).”

Derivative from this was the changing legal system used to handle disputes arising from these trades. From the middle to the end of the 17th Century, juries handled most civil actions because the disputes were fact-based. From the early 18th Century forward, most contested civil disputes never reached a jury. They were instead decided by judges, who ruled on matters of law. This judicial change, from fact-based pleading to legal pleading, combined with legislation that allowed private citizens to practice “pleading on behalf of others,” forever changed the legal environment for contract and other business disputes from the communal model to a lawyer-driven, rules-based system.¹⁹ All this is not to suggest that law became divorced from society, but rather that it became divorced from community (Mann, 1986: 1438–1439). In this way, the actions of the Puritan ministers surrounding the witchcraft episodes of the late 1690s not only changed the “market for salvation,” they may have also impacted in a real way American jurisprudence.

The changes after the witchcraft trials had a domino-effect. The lessening of community-based power and decisions by ministers led to increased commercial activity because businesses could be open longer and more often. With this increased commercialization came a need for a change in the method of exchange from barter to, ultimately, paper currency. The acceptance of paper currency allowed new traders to compete with established local merchants in these expanding markets. The increased commercial activity and new market participants required changes in the legal system to handle the inevitable disputes. The legal system changed to accommodate the innovations in the business environment. These social, business, and legal

modifications reflected the shift from the historical community-based, ministerial-controlled model to the more modern model.

4. Conclusions

Salem, Massachusetts, before and through the witchcraft trials, was a religion-based, community-oriented place. This enhanced the local Puritan ministers' ability to exert a significant degree of control over the area's citizens. During the height of the witchcraft trials of the late 1600s, there was an increased demand for ministerial services (salvation) in the Salem area. Prior research, which our research supports and builds upon, has argued that the ministers used the witchcraft hysteria as a demand-pull mechanism to maintain their political–economic influence over the area.

The backlash from the witchcraft trials allowed for changes in the business and legal environments in Salem and the surrounding New England region. The merchant-driven departure from strict religious interpretations of conduct permitted changes in currency, which altered how, where, and by whom business was conducted, and in the transformation of the legal system from the fact-based jury-driven model to a more rules-based, lawyer-driven model. These changes are supported by [Arrunada \(2004\)](#), who points out that Protestantism favors moral enforcement by second parties, as well as the development of trustworthy political and legal institutions.²⁰ By transitioning to a more neutral rules system, with a larger area of consensus for that system, Salem and the rest of New England moved to what was perceived by many to be a superior model.

Notes

1. The [Ekelund et al. \(1989\)](#) graphical model of the Medieval Catholic Church that is alluded to in [Mixon \(2000\)](#), and modified in [Mixon and King \(2008\)](#), depicts the *demand* for salvation as downward-sloping, where *price* is taken to mean the full-cost sacrifice imposed on church members for services rendered, and *quantity* is taken to mean church membership.
2. The ability to deal with witchcraft may have also served to differentiate Puritan religious thought from other competing theologies of the day. The basic inculcation of belief in witches may have served Puritan ministers as a defensive mechanism, preventing defection from Puritanism to other, less strict religious belief systems.
3. As [Yerby \(2008\)](#) indicates, each American community was almost literally a “body,” and the individuals making up the community could not regard themselves as autonomous creatures with their own particular interests. Everyone worked and lived for the sole purpose of the community’s survival.
4. In 17th Century America, companies that founded colonies were granted charters by England that gave the colonies limited governing powers. Major decisions regarding colonies were made in England. In certain cases, England revoked a colony’s charter, after which few local decisions were made by what were called “revolutionary governments.” Massachusetts’ charter was revoked in 1684, only to be later renewed in 1691–1692,

when England appointed Sir William Phips Colonial Governor of Massachusetts. For more, see Lounsberry (1941), Ubbelohde (1968), Ernst (1970), Bridenbaugh (1981), Demos (1982), Middleton (1996) and Mormul (2006).

5. This story is not altogether unlike that in Ekelund et al. (1992) regarding the Medieval Catholic Church's recognition of Purgatory as a market-pull innovation (device).
6. It could be argued that, because religious authorities would want to purge evidence of past dissent, the effects of Hutchinson's dissent would have been minimal by the time of the witchcraft episode in Salem. However, social (institutional) change (e.g., diminishing the role of religion in Colonial America and/or having women play more important social and political roles) takes time, and Hutchinson's dissent was an important, early part of that process. Therefore, this story highlights the prominent role of Puritan religious doctrine in all facets of life in Colonial Massachusetts.
7. See also Demos (1982). An alternative interpretation of Werking (1972, p. 283) is the view that, where the church is weakened by division, the clergy – a professional class within the religious services industry – faces strong incentives to maintain doctrinal unity (Berger, 1990). In more recent work on strictness as a distinguishing feature of sects and the nature of religion and magic, Iannacone (1988, 1994a, 1994b, 1998), Iannacone, Finke, and Stark (1997), Iannacone and Stark (1994), Stark (2001) and Stark and Finke (2000) claim that competition in religious services increases participation in religious markets.
8. See Oster (2004) and Mixon (2005) for a thorough discussion of the impact that the severe winter weather of 1692 and surrounding periods had on witchcraft hysterias such as that in Salem, Massachusetts.
9. In addition to Parris, a number of local ministers supported the Salem witch trials. Both Increase Mather (Harvard College) and Cotton Mather (North Church of Boston) supported the trials at the beginning and for some time afterwards. John Hale (Beverly Church) and Nicholas Noyes (First Church of Salem Town) are two other prominent ministers who supported the trials at one time (Starkey, 1963; Boyer and Nissenbaum, 1974). Increase Mather was influential in getting the British Crown to commission Phips as Royal Governor of Massachusetts in 1691-92. Phips was also a member of Cotton Mather's congregation in Boston (Lounsberry, 1941). Finally, as evidence of the zeal held by these ministers, Noyes is famous for referring to the eight convicted witches who were executed on September 22, 1693, as "eight firebrands of Hell (Starkey, 1963)."
10. To see how women were the ones normally accused of this anti-social (anti-community) behavior, 74 percent of the accused witches were women, and 45 percent of these women were, when accused of witchcraft, either single (27 percent) or widowed (18 percent) (Demos, 1970: 1315). Like many of the studies on witchcraft history, data are not always as complete as desired. Demos used data on about 165 people accused of witchcraft. To make the comparisons easier, percentages are used here. As for our study, which, unlike Demos (1970), is confined to the Salem witchcraft hysteria, tax records presented in Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974) and Mixon and Trevino (2003) indicate that there were 86 households in Salem Village, meaning that those accused of witchcraft represented a non-trivial portion of the adult female population.

11. A Court of Oyer and Terminer was a commission tasked with trying those accused of various crimes, including witchcraft. While it was not entirely a religious court in this particular instance, the inclusion of religious figures, particularly in the case of the renowned Mather, who supported the witch trials for some time, created the potential for the court to serve the interests of Puritan prestige.
12. Newton was later replaced by Anthony Checkles.
13. Given that Colonial America was a male-dominated society, men were the most likely to participate in any legal proceeding.
14. For more on this theory, see [Demos \(1970\)](#), [Karlsen \(1987\)](#) and [Reis \(1997\)](#).
15. One study examining wealth increases in New England from 1650 to 1709 concludes that there was a rapid increase in wealth between 1650 and 1680, but that that last three decades of this period show little or no growth ([Anderson, 1979](#)). The lagging growth in wealth from 1680 to 1709 that is shown in [Anderson \(1979\)](#), and the subsequent witchcraft hysteria that characterized the late 1600s, represent a series of events quite consistent with Oster's hypothesis that witchcraft hysteria emanated largely from bad economic conditions that resulted from extreme (cold) winter weather episodes.
16. Mather published his *Magnalia Christi Americana* ("Christ's great deeds in America") in 1702. By the time this was published, the church's control in New England was significantly weakened ([Johnson, 1976](#): 424).
17. The issuance of paper money replaced the usual commodity money and book accounts of the era. Mann's specific evidence utilizes Connecticut history, but the same general changes occurred in Massachusetts and the rest of New England during this period.
18. The barter economy led to a situation in which transaction costs were extremely, and perhaps in many cases, prohibitively, high ([Priest, 2001](#): 1320).
19. The legislation referred to here, which was passed in the Connecticut Colony in 1708, allowed for the emergence of professional lawyers.
20. [Arrunada \(2004\)](#) contrasts Protestantism with Catholicism, and concludes that Protestants are less tolerant of public fraud. Arrunada also cautions against ascribing simplistic consequences to Protestant and Catholic values. Obviously, further work, which is beyond the scope of this study, is necessary to more fully grasp these issues.

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